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INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0898
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 7889
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 6064
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 4401
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 2037
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 4389
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3484
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 8497
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5949
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0655
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2777
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000480

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PILLAIYAN IS CHOICE FOR CHIEF MINISTER
- BUT DOES HE HAVE A MAJORITY?

Classified By: DCM James R. Moore, for reasons 1.4(b,d).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The government's game plan for organizing the newly elected Eastern Provincial Council and naming the province's new Chief Minister may be unravelling. TMVP leader "Pillaiyan" and M.L.M. Hisbullah, both elected to the council for the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), lay claim to the position. President Rajapaksa has made his choice of Pillaiyan known, prompting Hisbullah and two other elected councilors to bolt. They say they will not support Pillaiyan and will form an independent group within the Provincial Council -- thus leaving Pillaiyan two votes short of the required majority. As of Friday evening, the government ranks appear in disarray, leaving open the possibility that no one will be able command a majority in the Provincial Council. The ethnic component of the competition between Pillaiyan and Hisbullah threatens to stoke already high tensions between the Tamil and Muslim communities in the East.

12. (SBU) The competition between a Tamil and a Muslim leader for the post of Chief Minister of the Eastern Province appears to have derailed the government's game plan for seating and organizing the newly-elected Eastern Provincial Council. Supporters of Hisbullah (a former leader of the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress, SLMC, who split from Rauff Hakeem's SLMC wing in order to contest the elections for the UPFA) claim the chief ministership on the grounds that seven Muslim provincial councilors were elected for the UPFA, more than the TMVP's six. Pillaiyan supporters declare that he should be the Chief Minister because he won the most preferential votes on the government side, 41,936 to Hisbullah's 35,949. Pillaiyan's supporters also argue that Pillaiyan has the support of all six TMVP councilors compared to three or four who support Hisbullah. They say the remaining Muslim councilors support A.L.M. Athaulla, another Muslim elected member. (Note: It is not clear whether all Muslim councilors in fact support Hisbullah, or whether they are divided.)

13. (SBU) Sri Lankan media reported on May 16 that the selection of Chief Minister has been delayed while President Rajapaksa reconciled the conflicting claims of Pillaiyan and Hisbullah. Later, the presidential Secretariat reportedly announced that the choice of Pillaiyan was "confirmed," and

that he would be sworn in later that day. This prompted Hisbullah and two other newly elected Muslim provincial councilors to announce they would not support Pillaiyan, forming instead an independent group in the Provincial Council outside the UPFA. They pointed out that under the Sri Lankan Constitution, the nominee for Chief Minister must be able to command a majority in the Provincial Council. As of 6 p.m. local time, the situation was confused, and no Chief Minister had yet been sworn in.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: The President's prestige is on the line in the current controversy. The holding of Provincial Council elections in the East - the first in 20 years - was to provide proof that the government was bringing democracy, development, and normal life back to the violence-plagued region following the government's rout of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam forces from the area in the spring of 2007. The President and his advisers will likely use all the means of persuasion at their disposal, possibly including extreme pressure on the recalcitrant provincial councilors, to get their game plan back on track. In the meantime, the uncertainty over the chief ministership and the formation of the new provincial government is likely to spill over into increased tensions between Tamils and Muslims in the East, with possible outbreaks of violence. However, the security forces the government had pre-positioned for the elections in the East are still in place, and should be able to maintain their hold on the situation in the province. Embassy will continue to monitor the situation closely.

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